

# New Willowbrook director points to 'miles of progress'

By ROBERT MIRALDI

On March 25, 1975, Harold C. Piepenbrink's first day as director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, he looked with disdain on a small parking lot in front of the center and complained that signs in front of parking spaces had nameplates of persons long gone from Willowbrook.

That is a little thing, Piepenbrink said, but it is symbolic of administrative problems at Willowbrook.

Yesterday, Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd took over as the temporary director of the controversial center where 2,650 retarded residents live. The parking space signs were gone, but no new nameplates had replaced them.

It is a small thing, as Piepenbrink said, but it is symbolic still. Willowbrook has come "miles and miles," progress has been made, Coughlin said yesterday at his inaugural press conference.

"Without making excuses, though, it takes longer than at General Motors to get things done around here," he added.

Just how long, however, will determine in about a month whether attorneys in the precedent-setting Willowbrook court case will seek contempt charges against Gov. Carey and Lawrence C. Kolb, Department of Mental Hygiene commissioner.

In April 1975, Carey and Kolb and plaintiffs for parents groups who had gone into Federal Court demanding change at Willowbrook agreed to a 26-page consent decree, outlining the changes and concurrent dismantling of Willowbrook.

Many deadlines imposed by the decree will expire in April and, Coughlin said, there is a "possibility of contempt." Some of the decree's "major items" will not have been fulfilled, he said, adding that the decree asks for a "helluva lot of things."



Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd, new acting director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, makes a point during his first press conference.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

In his next breath he said that "A lot of things are happening here. I think if the department can show good faith, there will be no contempt."

Department officials, Coughlin said, are "very nervous about any type of hiatus" which might impede progress toward fulfilling the sweeping scope of the consent decree and invite a contempt citation.

Thus, although Coughlin is a deputy commissioner, he will

fill the director's position until a new director is found. "I'll go where the commissioner feels I'm needed," he said.

Piepenbrink, heralded as the answer to Willowbrook's management problems, resigned last week because of ill health. He had undergone major stomach surgery in December and had returned only recently on a part-time basis. His resignation last week came as a surprise to Willowbrook ob-

servers.

Describing himself as a "rah, rah" type of administrator who will "walk the grounds" and be "very visible in the wards," Coughlin, 37, a Brooklyn native, cited our major areas of compliance that concern the department. They are:

Community placement. Coughlin said "our best estimates" indicate that mandated 200 placements by April 30